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Feature Article - Immunisation

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Immunisation has been identified as a major health issue throughout Australia and is nationally and internationally recognised as an important public health measure.

Immunisation is the only way of providing effective protection against the vaccine preventable diseases of tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, measles, mumps, rubella, Haemophilus influenza type b (Hib), hepatitis B, and influenza.

Although the immunisation coverage rate has improved over recent years in Tasmania as a result of community education and awareness campaigns, outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases continue to occur in Tasmania and the remainder of Australia.

For example, in Tasmania during 1996, reported cases of vaccine preventable diseases included 37 cases of rubella, one of Hib, 23 of measles, and 36 of whooping cough. One case of tetanus was also reported.

The introduction of immunisation programs is the most important factor responsible for a 91% reduction in mortality from measles, a 99% reduction for tetanus and whooping cough, and 100% reduction for diphtheria and polio in Australia. However, because some children are not adequately immunised, measles, mumps, rubella, and whooping cough still occur in our community.

One of the aims of the new Tasmanian Public Health Bill is to introduce the practice of requiring parents to show documented evidence of their child's immunisation status on school or child care enrolment. Children who are not immunised will be excluded from schools or child care groups during an outbreak of an infectious disease. Exclusion reduces the possibility of these children becoming infected and greatly diminishes the risk they pose to other children.

Immunisation is the only method of potentially eliminating many life threatening diseases. There is no room for complacency and while vaccine preventable diseases can be eliminated, studies have shown that they can return if immunisation drops below acceptable levels.

Data collection on immunisation has improved with the establishment of the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR) in 1996. Tasmanian General Practitioners Municipal Councils, community health centres and hospitals are participating in this data collection system.

Data from the ACIR should provide more reliable estimates of immunisation coverage in Tasmania. It will also form the basis of an optional recall/reminder scheme advising parents when their child's next vaccination is due.

In recognition of the importance of immunisation and the need to improve coverage, the Tasmanian Immunisation Strategy was developed and implemented in January 1994 in

partnership with the National Immunisation Strategy and associated national immunisation promotional activities.

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